DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 350 059 JC 920 517

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TITLE	Grading Papers More Objectively and Effectively.
PUB DATE	Mar 92
NOTE	12p.; In: Teaching of Psychology: Ideas and Innovations. Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Undergraduate Teaching of Psychology (6th, Ellenville, NY, March 18-20, 1992); see JC 920 516.
PUB TYPE	Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Classroom Research; Comparative Analysis; *Evaluation Criteria; Grades (Scholastic); *Grading; Higher Education; *Research Papers (Students); *Student Attitudes; *Student Evaluation; Teacher Student Relationship; Undergraduate Students; Undergraduate Study; *Writing Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	Kutztown University PA

ABSTRACT

In an attempt to make grading a less arduous, and more accurate, objective task, a checklist of criteria was utilized to grade psychology term papers at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. The method appeared to generate more feedback and lead to greater consistency, as well as a better understanding among students of the grade received. In order to determine students' attitudes toward the checklist method, 43 students who were enrolled in a statistics course were asked to respond to a hypothetical grading situation. Study participants read a synopsis of a term paper assigned by an instructor, and then were given a description of two different grading methods: one was the traditional method, in which the instructor writes positive and negative comments on each paper; and the other was a checklist method of grading. Both methods resulted in the instructor assigning a numerical grade to the papers. Participants were then asked their opinions of the two methods. Analyses of responses, based on chi-square tests of goodness of fit, included the following: (1) 55.81% felt that grading with a checksheet provided more feedback; (2) 65.12% believed that grading with comments provided less variety of feedback; (3) 76.74% felt that grading with a checksheet resulted in a fairer evaluation; (4) 95.35% felt that grading with a checksheet lead to greater instructor consistency; (5) 69.77% felt that grading with comments lead to less understanding of the grade received; and (6) 62.79% preferred that teachers use the checksheet when grading papers. A list of references, and three different criteria checksheets are included. (MAB)

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Grading Papers More Objectively and Effectively

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Writing is a fundamental part of the educational process and the "writing across the curriculum" movement has called for teachers in all disciplines to take a more active role in improving students' writing skills. Still, instructors are often reluctant to require writing exercises. According to Boice (1990), teachers rank the extra workload involved in reading and grading written reports as the number one drawback of such assignments. Although grading is not the sole purpose in requiring students to write, the reality is that most assignments must be graded. Due to its more subjective nature, teachers and students are also concerned about the grading criteria for written work. Strategies that reduce the arduous nature of evaluation are therefore needed if instructors are to incorporate more writing into their courses.

My purpose here is to present you with some strategies that aid me in being more objective and effective in grading writing assignments. But first I would like to describe how I used to grade papers. Like many of my colleagues, I would read a paper and develop an overall sense of whether it was an "A paper" or a "B paper," etc. This judgment was largely dependent on the student's writing style and whether the student evidenced comprehension of the material. Inevitably there were papers that were not clearly in one grade category or another. Did the paper deserve a B- or a

C+? I found myself resorting to grades such as B-/C+.

I was not satisfied with this system. I was concerned about the fairness and the consistency of my evaluations so I decided to develop a checklist specifying my evaluation criteria for a given assignment. Table 1 illustrates the rating sheet I use for an assignment in my Adolescent Psychology course. Students choose one of four paper options: They can do a case study of an adolescent, a review of a popular book giving advice about adolescence, keep a journal of their own memories of adolescence, or write a traditional literature review on a topic of their choice. Table 2 depicts the rating sheet I use to grade APA research papers in my Experimental Psychology course. This is essentially a research methods course where students carry out their own research project. It is also the course in my department's curriculum where students are required to learn APA style. The grading checklist in Table 3 is similar to that in Table 2 but I use this for APA research reports where the emphasis is on content not mechanics. I use this checklist in my Cognitive Psychology course.

Having specific criteria and associated point values keeps me on track while grading. Others also find formal evaluation criteria useful (e.g., Price, 1990). This procedure is also efficient. For example, I simply give a rating to each student's statement of

the hypothesis in a research report rather than repeatedly writing out comments like "good statement of the hypothesis" or "poor statement of the hypothesis." Attention is still paid to providing comments more specific to the content of the paper. I give students more feedback this way because they receive input on each criterion. Willingham (1990, p. 12) argues that "The student should know immediately which aspects of the paper need the most work, which need less work, and which aspects have been handled well." Using formal criteria accomplishes this objective. In addition, students are provided with the criteria when I make the assignments. I feel that I receive better papers because my expectations are clear and there is less of a guessing game for students as to "what the teacher wants."

I conducted a study to examine students' perceptions of the traditional grading method vs. a checksheet rating system. Subjects were 43 students (*M* age = 20.76 years, *SD* = 1.32) enrolled in my Statistics course. None had ever taken a course with me where I required a paper. There were 32 females and 11 males with 86% of the sample being psychology majors.Subjects read a description of a hypothetical term paper assigned by an instructor. This was followed by a description of two different ways of grading the papers. One way was the traditional method where the

teacher would read the papers putting positive and negative comments on each. The other way was to have the teacher use a list of criteria and subjects were told to assume the teacher used the checksheet shown in Table 1. In either case, the teacher was said to put a numerical grade on each paper and to follow the general guidelines given to students about the paper requirements. Subjects were then asked six questions about grading procedures where the possible responses were, "I'm not sure," "The two procedures are about the same," "Grading with comments," or "Grading with a checksheet." The questions were as follows:

1. Which grading procedure do you think provides a greater amount of feedback to students?
2. Which grading procedure do you think provides less variety of feedback to students?
3. Which grading procedure do you think provides a fairer evaluation by the teacher?
4. Which grading procedure do you think is better in helping the teacher be more consistent in grading papers?
5. Which grading procedure do you think makes it harder for students to understand why they got a certain grade on the paper?
6. Which grading procedure would you prefer to have the teacher use if your paper were being graded?

Chi-square tests of goodness of fit were used to compare the traditional grading procedure with the checksheet system. Results are presented in Table 4. The subjects thought that formal criteria on a checksheet would be significantly more likely to result in a fairer and more consistent evaluation by the teacher. The subjects thought that the traditional grading system with comments would result in less variety of feedback and would make it harder for students to understand why they received the grade they did. Subjects were significantly more likely to prefer the checksheet system over the traditional grading system. In open-ended responses, some subjects did express that the checksheet would be more impersonal and that they liked receiving comments from teachers. They seemed to think that the use of a checklist precluded the teacher from making comments, which is not the case.

On the whole, then, I find that there is merit in making grading criteria as explicit as possible. Developing a checksheet forces me to think about the objectives that I want to accomplish with a particular assignment. It makes sense to communicate those objectives to students and to provide them with feedback on how well they have met each of those objectives. Using formal criteria reduces the subjectivity of grading papers, but it does not

necessarily reduce the amount of time required for grading. I am unaware of a system that can do that and still do justice to the evaluation process.

References

Boice, R. (1990). Faculty resistance to writing-intensive courses. *Teaching of Psychology, 17*, 13-17.

Price, D. W. W. (1990). A model for reading and writing about primary sources: The case of introductory psychology. *Teaching of Psychology, 17*, 48-53.

Willingham, D. B. (1990). Effective feedback on written assignments. *Teaching of Psychology, 17*, 10-13.

Table 1

Criteria for General Papers

MAJOR CRITERIA:	5	4	3	2	1
Summary of source material	____	____	____	____	____
Integrates course material	____	____	____	____	____
General organization	____	____	____	____	____
Conclusions reached/defense	____	____	____	____	____
Approp. use of references	____	____	____	____	____
Writing style/clarity	____	____	____	____	____
Follows instructions	____	____	____	____	____

MINOR CRITERIA:	3	2	1
Length of paper	____	____	____
Amount & quality of references	____	____	____
References in APA style	____	____	____
Spelling, punctuation & neatness	____	____	____
Effort	____	____	____

OTHER COMMENTS:

Table 2

Criteria for APA Research Reports

Name _____ Date _____

Title _____

CONTENT OF PAPER (72 pts.)

Adequacy of title (2)	_____
Abstract (5)	_____
Introduction	
Literature (amount, relevance) (5)	_____
Clear description of prior findings (5)	_____
Statement of current problem/hypothesis (5)	_____
Method	
Subjects (3)	_____
Materials/Apparatus (3)	_____
Description of procedure (5)	_____
Design considerations (counterbalancing, random assignment, etc.) (5)	_____
Results	
Appropriate analyses performed (3)	_____
Analyses clearly presented (3)	_____
Correct values (df, p, M, SD) (5)	_____
Correct conclusions drawn (5)	_____
Discussion	
Restatement of major findings (5)	_____
Relation to other literature (5)	_____
Discussion of flaws, problems (5)	_____
References - used where needed (3)	_____

APA STYLE (18 pts.)

Double-spaced throughout (1)	_____
Pages numbered, short title on each (2)	_____
Proper format for headings (2)	_____
Title page format (2)	_____
Main body typed on continuous pages (1)	_____
Introduction headed by title (1)	_____
Reference list begins on new page (1)	_____
Reference list in alphabetical order (1)	_____
References in APA style in text (2)	_____
References are complete/accurate (3)	_____
Reference citations in correct APA style (2)	_____

OTHER (10 pts.)

Statement of informed consent (1)	_____
Debriefing statement (2)	_____
Statistical printouts or equivalent (1)	_____
Originality of idea (1)	_____
Project difficulty level (2)	_____
Oral presentation (3)	_____

Table 3

Criteria for General Research Reports

Name _____

Title _____

Abstract (5) _____

Introduction (10) _____

- Background-
- Statement of problem-
- Statement of hypothesis-

Method (10) _____

- Subjects-
- Apparatus-
- Materials-
- Procedure-

Results (10) _____

- Appropriate analyses-
- Correct values-
- Correct conclusions-

Discussion (10) _____

- Restatement of findings-
- Relation to literature-
- Flaws, problems-

References (5) _____

- Used where needed-
- Quantity-
- APA style-

Table 4

Students' Responses about Grading Procedures

		Grading w/ Comments	Grading w/ Checksheet	
1.	greater amount of feedback	30.23 (13)	55.81 (24)	$p < .10$
2.	less variety of feedback	65.12 (28)	27.91 (12)	$p < .025$
3.	fairer evaluation	16.28 (7)	76.74 (33)	$p < .001$
4.	teacher more consistent	4.65 (2)	95.35 (41)	$p < .001$
5.	harder to understand grade rec'd	69.77 (30)	30.23 (12)	$p < .01$
6.	prefer teacher use	30.23 (13)	62.79 (27)	$p < .05$

Note. Percentages do not add to 100% because some of the 43 subjects said the two grading procedures were about the same or gave a "not sure" response so their data was not used in the chi-square. Frequencies are in parentheses.